

The Circus in Australian Art



Albury City



Graeme Drendel, *Observations from the Y*, oil on canvas

Tom Alberts, David Archer, Monique Auricchio, George Baldessin, Dorrit Black, John Brack, Robert Campbell, Margaret Cilento, Ray Cook, Robert Dickerson, Vincent Drane, Graeme Drendel, Ian Fairweather, Cedric Flower, Donald Friend, Joe Furlonger, James Guppy, Ponch Hawkes, Euan Heng, Petrina Hicks, Lorraine Jenyns, Warren Langley, Nerissa Lea, Michael Leunig, Stewart MacFarlane, Noel McKenna, Kevin Mortensen, John Olsen, Alexander Seton, Andrew Sibley, Jeffrey Smart, David Strachan, Albert Tucker, Ken Whisson, Arthur Wicks, Fred Williams, Anne Zahalka, Salvatore Zofrea



THE CIRCUS-THE BIG TOP, THE CIRQUE, THE BIG TENT, THE CARNIVAL, THE CIRCLE

Physical achievement, colour and movement, comedy, drama and mystery are all parts of a visit to the circus. The theme of circus, its history and changing character has continued to provide inspiration for artists in Australia and overseas.

Our touring exhibition *Step Right up! the circus in Australian art* is a collaboration with national, state and regional partners. The exhibition concept and creation has been led by AlburyCity, through the Albury Art Gallery and in partnership with the Albury Wodonga based Flying Fruit Fly Circus. This exhibition draws together works from the AlburyCity Collection, works by commissioned artists with a range of historical and contemporary works drawn from state, regional, university, commercial and private collections. An ArtsNSW grant assisted in the development of contemporary work for the exhibition with the partial funding of an artist-in-residence program.

Visions of Australia provided both a development grant and a touring grant for the exhibition and as a result, *Step Right Up! the circus in Australian art* will be shown at many venues over several states.

Carina Clement
AlburyCity Cultural Programs Team Leader



A UNIVERSALLY LOVED ART FORM, CIRCUS PLAYS A BIG PART IN THE IDENTITY OF THE ALBURY WODONGA COMMUNITY. JUST AS WE TEND TO LAY CLAIM TO ANY FAMOUS SPORTING OR MEDIA PERSONALITIES, ALMOST COUNTING THEIR SUCCESS AS OUR OWN, SO THE IMAGE AND SUCCESS OF THE INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED FLYING FRUIT FLY CIRCUS IS A MATTER OF GREAT PRIDE IN THE REGION.

As a subject for the visual arts, circus holds enormous scope and many artists in Australia and abroad have explored the theme – the physical achievement, endurance and discipline, the grace of the aerialists, the dexterity of jugglers, the colour and movement, all coupled together with ideas of the circus as a place of mystery and imagination, real life drama or inherent mayhem.

The *Step Right Up* project began by offering ten contemporary Australian artists the opportunity to undertake a residency in Albury and immerse themselves in the world of the Flying Fruit Fly Circus. The works made about the ‘Fruities’ as they are affectionately known, illustrate current concerns of narrative painting, sculpture, portrait and staged photography. They also give the Albury community and the circus an opportunity to see themselves through different eyes and to celebrate the achievements of both visual and performing artists.

In developing a broader exhibition exploring the ‘Circus in Australian Art’ we have aimed for more than just a simplistic selection of circus images by visual artists, pulled together because they have a common theme. The exhibition aims to offer intellectual access for a broad range of audiences from children to adults, from circus lovers to art lovers. The new residency works by leading Australian artists, coupled together with historic works from public and private collections, provide an exploration of how both traditional and contemporary art forms represent the circus on a psychological and symbolic level as well as the changing attitudes toward circus itself.

Contemporary circus has moved away from animal acts and freak shows toward acrobatics and new technology. Animal rights activists have long convinced most of us that the exploitation of animals should no longer be tolerated. While training and employment of dogs and horses is still common, most of the circus world has a new focus on human skill, power and endurance and the entertainment value of story-telling and humour.

The Flying Fruit Fly Circus breaks new ground in a specialist children’s performance company that not only trains young artists, but presents top class performance product around the world. Involvement in circus and performance develops a culture of collaboration and trust. Complex acts are developed involving group efforts to build human towers, balance and lift, catch and coordinate. The success relies on everyone concentrating and working together.

As a subject for art each artist takes a different approach. Photographer Anne Zahalka drew inspiration from early historic photograph of the circus, while Warren Langley’s work conjures up images of a high-tech Cirque du Soleil sound and light extravaganza.

During his residency, James Guppy was fascinated by the associated 'Fruit Bats', a group of mature age circus enthusiasts who meet weekly and train in parallel with the children's circus. Membership is for over 45 year olds and they are especially reliant on team work, trust and collaboration. The risk of injury to aging bodies is very real and the added challenge keeps this energetic group on their toes, with discipline paramount to their survival.

In determining the scope of the exhibition, a visual arts focus has meant that historic memorabilia has not been included and certain areas such as graphic posters and documentary photography, both huge areas in themselves, have been carefully selected. Works by Ponch Hawkes, a photographer who is well known for her interest in the circus as a subject, explore both documentary and expressive approaches in her work. Graphic posters are represented by a wonderful selection from the Flying Fruit Fly Circus collection including the first poster ever which was designed by local school girl.



Salvatore Zofrea, *The Circus in Borgia*, from the *Appassionata Series of 100 woodcuts*, 1994-99, woodcut in black ink with hand colouring. Anonymous gift 2002, NEREM Collection, New England Regional Art Museum, Armidale, NSW

In a historical survey of the circus theme in Australian Art, most of the earliest works are in this graphic or documentary photography genre. The oldest work in the exhibition is an original woodblock for the promotion of Ashton's Circus c1857 from the Burke Memorial Museum in Beechworth North East Victoria. An exhibition print was made from the block in 2001 otherwise it is regrettable that many early works and in particular works on paper are too sensitive to endure a long touring exhibition. However, the main activity around the circus theme has generally been by a smaller number of artists who have developed substantial bodies of work on the theme. These have happened intermittently throughout the twentieth century and include artists such as George Baldessin, Fred Williams, Ken Whisson, Margaret Cilento, and Joe Furlonger.

A common thread throughout many of the residency artists and others who have tackled the theme is the interest and challenge of capturing movement. The repetition in training allows the artist the opportunity to observe the same movement many times while developing drawings, so sketchbooks and works from life are a strong component of the exhibition. Motion is also explored through still photography and the mechanical works of sculptors Arthur Wicks and David Archer.

All together, with John Olsen's playful and poetic style and some fun elements to balance the darker side, *Step Right Up* lets us look back to our childhood memories, to delight at the colour, movement and entertainment the circus provides, while gaining an insight into the lives and inspiration of the artists both visual and performing.

Rita Lazauskas
Step Right Up! Curator



Salvatore Zofrea, *The Clowns – Homage to Fellini*, from the *Appassionata Series of 100 woodcuts*, 1994-9, woodcut in black ink with hand colouring. Anonymous gift 2002, NEREM Collection, New England Regional Art Museum, Armidale, NSW

CIRCUS AND THE ART OF SPECTACLE



When British artist Michael Landy systematically destroyed all his possessions in a vacant London shop in 2001, the introverted world of the artist collided with global consumerism and the art of spectacle. If, as may be argued, shopping malls are today's most visible 'art objects' and the ritual of shopping an 'aesthetic activity',¹ Landy enacted a radical counter performance, titled *Break Down*, in iconic Oxford Street. The spectacle of everything from Landy's birth certificate to his car being annihilated over several days prompted a 'media circus'. An award-winning documentary of his artwork rescued Landy from relative obscurity (after an early artistic flowering) and made him famous.

Yet the circus proper – the ultimate bastion of entertainment and spectacle – continues to provide artists with opportunities for less extravagant gestures and invites a genuine contemplation of the human condition.

The Mythology of the Circus

In art, film and literature, the circus has, until relatively recently, enjoyed a mixed reputation as a travelling band of masters and misfits, where awe-inspiring performances on horseback, highwire and trapeze were coupled with the antics of captive animals and jaded clowns; where the skills of juggler, knife-thrower and magician were paraded alongside midgets, giants, wild men, fat ladies, bearded ladies and other 'living curiosities'. Since its origins in England in the eighteenth-century,² the circus has been the object of romantic fantasy and morbid imagining; of escape from conventional constraints and abject servitude; of physical prowess and demeaning ineptitude; of beauty and ugliness; of good and evil.

Nineteenth-century Paris was the home of at least three permanent circuses and these became a rich source of inspiration for the creative

avant-garde and their successors. Artists including Honoré Daumier, Georges Rouault, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edgar Degas, Auguste Renoir, Georges Seurat, James Tissot, Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger and Jean Dubuffet were drawn to the dynamic imagery and symbolic possibilities of the circus. For instance, Daumier's lithographs lampooning the establishment were published in satirical newspapers such as *La Caricature* (early 1830s) and *Le Charivari* (mid 1850s), with parliament depicted as a theatre or circus arena and politicians cast as cynical, opportunistic or inept performers. One of Daumier's most famous prints shows King Louis-Philippe dressed as a clown, pointing his whip at a blindfolded statue of Justice as the curtain falls on the parliamentary proceedings. The text on the print, 'Draw the curtain, the farce is ended', is a quote attributed to François Rabelais as he lay dying in a drunken stupor. Roualt, on the other hand, painted portraits of clowns as sad observers of humanity. He was a religious man and his clowns could also be read as metaphors of the sorrowing Christ. Toulouse-Lautrec created a series of drawings of the circus after recovering from a mental breakdown in 1899. Some images reveal the plight of circus animals and the cruelty of their trainers.

Fred Williams,
Little Man Juggling 1955,
copper plate etching,
The Arts Centre's
Public Art Collection,
Melbourne.
Image courtesy, Lyn Williams.



Léger's interest in the figure and attitude of social inclusiveness found more positive expression in the symbolism of the circus. A series of paintings from 1918 celebrate the spectacle of the circus and its life-affirming qualities after the slaughter of the First World War.

The Contemporary Circus

Today, with the advent of international charters of human rights, animal welfare and economic imperatives to good health, circuses, particularly in 'first-world' countries like Australia, have undergone serious transformation. Animal acts are rare and circuses focus on physical fitness and expertise, professionalism, the empowerment of children and the disadvantaged, and fun. With the advantages of modern technology at their disposal (in terms of education, training and spectacle), circuses seek inclusion rather than exclusion, are community minded, sometimes politically motivated, and range from highly visible global entities to smaller, more knockabout – though always incredibly skilled – local groups. Circus Oz (established 1978, Melbourne) and Cirque du Soleil (established 1984, Quebec) are world-famous exponents of the genre, with smaller examples like Australia's Flying Fruit Fly Circus and Circus Monoxide establishing unique and impressive reputations nationally and abroad.

One could ask, in this scenario, has the circus – and the art of the circus – become trivialised or sanitised? In denying the dark side of our human nature, symbolised in the traditional life and imagery of the circus, have we discarded the very means by which our experience is shown as deeply felt or in high relief? Have we lost the will to know ourselves; to achieve our own sense of balance within the world?



Margaret Cilento, *Clowning around, Circus Oz* 2003, oil on canvas, Private Collection of Margaret Cilento

HISTORICAL SURVEY

Psychology and the body

Albury Art Gallery's exhibition, *Step Right Up: The Circus in Australian Art*, goes some way to answering these questions. In partnership with Australia's Flying Fruit Fly Circus (established in Albury-Wodonga in the 1979 Year of the Child), the Albury Art Gallery commissioned ten artists to create new works for the project, with a survey of historical of works in diverse mediums drawn from their own collection as well as state, regional, university and commercial gallery collections.

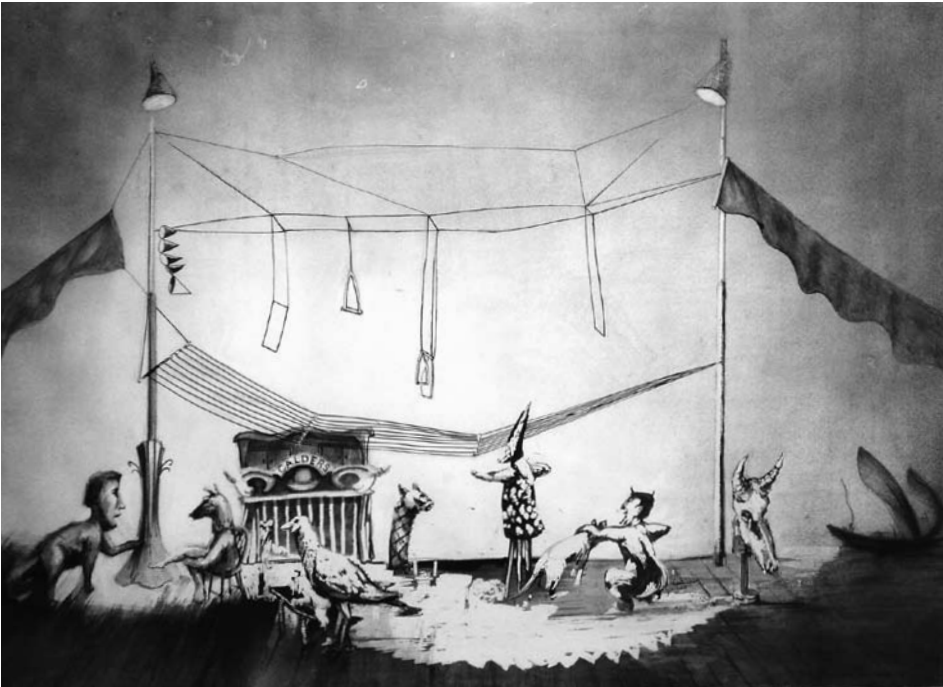
Australian artists have generally drawn on the imagery and symbolism of the circus within the broader scope of their work rather than as a sustained study – the exception being Margaret Cilento, who finds the drama of the circus a constant inspiration for depicting the body in motion. The modelling of the figures, use of colour and spatial relationships in *Clowning Around* convey both exertion and exhilaration as the pair – one earthbound, one held aloft – practise their gravity-defying act. A simplified landscape in strips of purple and gold provide a dreamlike context for the picture.

George Baldessin, an Italian-born Melbourne artist who died untimely in 1978 at age 39, focused on the psychology as much as the physicality of the human figure. His 'personages' owe a debt to Goya and are characteristically fragmented. Fred Williams' 'Music Hall' prints, two of which are represented in 'Step Right Up', are said to have prompted Baldessin's first etchings of circus performers. His acrobats in this exhibition share an ungainly – almost grotesque – atavism yet their placement in empty space conveys a sense of compassion. The figure captured in mid-air at the edge of ominous, cliff-like human forms has something in common with Ponch Hawkes's dynamic photographs of *Swallows*.



George Baldessin, *Performer*, 1972 cast bronze, courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries - Sydney and Melbourne

Baldessin's bronze of a young girl who leans backwards on a slim frame is more lifelike than the acrobats in his etchings yet her position also suggests vulnerability. Appearing even more precarious, Joe Furlonger's 2006 bronze female figure nevertheless has an upbeat, optimistic energy. His ravishing circus paintings share this exuberance.



Kevin Mortensen, *Calder's Circus*, 2005, Mixed media on paper, AlburyCity Collection

Female sexuality has always been a feature of the circus, with women and girls in revealing costumes performing physical feats and inevitably the object of erotic desire. Andrew Sibley's *Again Through the Hoop*, 1983, shows a circus girl being manipulated by four older 'puppet masters' – two women and two men, one of whom is a clergyman. The backdrop suggests a ring but is largely undifferentiated dark space. Sibley uses circus imagery to continue his exploration of universal themes in human relationships – in this case the exercise of power.

Situating figures in a void or relatively barren land- or seascape is a surrealist device and is found in a number of works in *'Step Right Up'*. The young male jugglers in Jeffrey Smart's print are depicted in blue space, their shadows and a twin-peaked circus tent providing the only indication of perspective and scale. Such compositions invite reflection, in this case strengthened by the central, supine figure balancing a large cube (symbol of the earth) on his upturned feet while the more distant, upright figure juggles a constellation of spheres. The picture has a timeless quality, suggesting fundamental questions about our place in the universe.



George Baldessin, *Trapeze*, etching, aquatint and colour stencil, Australian Galleries – Melbourne and Sydney
 George Baldessin, *Acrobats*, etching, aquatint and colour stencil, Australian Galleries – Melbourne and Sydney
 Fred Williams, *Swinging*, 1956, zinc etching, The Arts Centre's Public Art Collection, Melbourne.
 Image courtesy, Lyn Williams.

Kevin Mortensen, who represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1980, is a sculptor, printmaker and performance artist whose alter ego is 'the birdman'. His delicate drawing of the circus with its cast of odd creatures – a man and woman with canine features, a satyr, cat, stilt figure, bird and what appears to be a horned pig's skull – gives a mythic view of the circus as a metaphor for life. As one looks more carefully, the stage reveals itself as a deck, and the trapeze and safety net the rigging of a flimsy 'ship of fools'. The pianola in the background bearing the name 'Calders' could refer to sculptor Alexander Calder, whose experience at sea of seeing the sun and a full moon in the same dawn sky inspired him to give up his career as a ship's engineer and become an artist. One of his first assignments as an illustrator for a New York police gazette was to sketch the circus – the beginning of a lifelong fascination. Whereas Smart's work is philosophic and intellectual, Mortensen's drawing is emotive and poignant.

Somewhat in the same vein, Leunig depicts a pair of trapeze artists swinging towards each other across a vast empty space. The smallness of the figures accentuates their fragility and co-dependence within the void.

Advanced Juggling, 2005, a pastel and pencil drawing by Euan Heng, shows a man in a suit who juggles three birds behind his back. There is no backdrop, simply the figure and the birds. Heng's unique graphic style is immediately recognisable and his work combines wit and symbolism. In contrast, Salvatore Zofrea's intense hand-coloured woodcuts are pressured and claustrophobic. They are highly textured images, drawn as if the artist is on stage amid the sweat of the performers. In both examples, a horse and rider are at the centre of



Jeffrey Smart, *Circus Performers*, 1980, Planographic print,
The Arts Centre's Public Art Collection, Melbourne



Andrew Sibley, *Again through the hoop*, 1983, Oil & enamel on canvas,
Australian National University Art Collection

the action. The more dynamic of the images shows the duo circled by a crowded cast of sinister masked clowns, musicians, a wolf figure, a performing monkey and a caged bird. A small female figure crouched in the foreground appears to be weeping.

Comparable only in its animated clutter is John Olsen's wonderful self-portrait in the midst of life's domestic 'circus' and Lorraine Jenyns's 1977 wild, colourful ceramic of a bearded lady.

Clowns

Albert Tucker, Robert Dickerson and David Strachan are represented in the exhibition with drawings of clowns. Dickerson's signature faces with large eyes convey a wistful sadness. His *Blue Clown*, with a nod to Picasso, shows the bust of a clown with an expression of world-weary compassion. The minimal lines, skilful shading and solid black background give this face spiritual gravitas. David Strachan's clown, in contrast, is more immediately human – sensitively drawn, and reaching towards connection with another.

Placed in the foreground with a strange, sexualised female figure to his left, Albert Tucker's clown has the flaring nostrils and crescent mouth that emerged in his wartime 'Images of Modern Evil' series. In



an interview with James Mollison and Nicholas Bonham, Tucker explained that the crescent shape was a key that allowed him access to his subconscious – the source of his creativity.³ His images are haunted by violence and sexual perversion; the dark side of the circus suited his tortured sensibility.

Robert Dickerson, *Blue Clown*, silk-screen in blue ink with hand colouring, gift of Jennifer Dickerson 1998, NEREM Collection, New England Regional Art Museum, Armidale, NSW

Animals

The Cardoso Flea Circus is a contemporary exception to the animal-free circus. Maria Fernanda Cardoso, Columbian representative in the 50th Venice Biennale and resident in Sydney since 1997, was drawn to the tradition of the flea circus through her fascination with nature and the challenge of working with such minute creatures. Cardoso's revival of an eighteenth-century tradition was presented live at the Sydney Opera House during the 2000 Festival of Sydney and several years later at the Museum of Contemporary Art as part of the 'Material World' exhibition. 'Professor' Cardoso, as ringmaster without a whip, claims that she taught herself to train fleas in circus arts through painstaking research, observation and the use of behavioral psychology. In an interview with Jane Goodall on ABC radio, she refers to Professor Bertolotto, whose flea circus, renowned in Europe, attracted royal patronage in London in 1830.⁴ Imitators reduced the integrity of the flea circus and it fell into disrepute until Cardoso's obsessive artistic imagination gave it new currency. David Archer's mechanical *Flea Circus* that sounds a bell when the handle is turned is a witty allusion to this tradition.

Noel McKenna's 1992 paintings of a performing elephant have a wry humour. In one work an elephant is shown taking a photograph beneath the black cloth of an antique camera; in another, an elephant stirs a cup of tea with its trunk. The gaze of the trainer, the eye and mouth of the elephant (visible in the second picture), and the bland ochre ring meeting featureless grey space, emphasise the incongruity of wild animals tamed to do tricks for human entertainment.

While elephants seem particularly alienated in such a small circle, Monique Aurrichio's dark tonal print of a seated animal trainer with hat and cane in hand while five small dogs stand on their hind legs in a row, is an exercise in pathos.

Working at a time when animals were accepted as part of the circus, Cedric Flower's supple sketches showing elephants, circus workers and spectators outside the tent are narrative in style, while Donald Friend's drawing of a cluster of circus characters in procession includes an eye-catching bear on skates, moving contrary to the rest of the group.



David Archer, *Flea Circus*, 3D mixed media, AlburyCity Collection



Noel McKenna, *Circus Elephant (cup of tea)*, 1992, Oil and enamel on canvas board, The Arts Centre's Public Art Collection, Melbourne. © Noel McKenna Licensed by VISCOPY Australia 2008



Noel McKenna, *Circus Elephant (photographer)*, 1992, Oil and enamel on canvas board, The Arts Centre's Public Art Collection, Melbourne. © Noel McKenna Licensed by VISCOPY Australia 2008



Ponch Hawkes, *Robyn Laurie and the Running List*, 1979, Silver Gelatin Print, AlburyCity Collection

Movement, stillness and time

The circus offers unique opportunities for artists to explore the dynamics of movement and stillness. Painting in gouache on board, Ian Fairweather fills the rectangular space of his circus composition with harmonious, flowing forms. The painting is structured to keep the eye moving with a subtle rhythm of line, colour and quietude. On the other hand, Ken Whisson's arrhythmic juxtaposition of these elements in *Juggler and pink, yellow and blue aerialists*, 2001, sets up constant movement. John Brack's 1998 oil painting of a solitary acrobat upside-down in mid-air combines spectacular movement and tension in a composition of complex perspectives, while the four aerialists in Dorrit Black's patterned colour linocut from 1928–29 are breathtaking stylisations of sweeping movement around an intrusive and potentially perilous tent pole.

Photography captures moments in time that appear timeless. The works by Ann Zahalka and Petrina Hicks, which entered the Albury Collection via the 'Polaroid Circus' exhibition (another collaboration with the Flying Fruit Fly Circus), exploit this photographic cliché. Zahalka takes a theatrical approach, using sepia-type colour, with her subjects dressed in period costumes and assuming poses seen in studio photographs of the 1920s and 1930s. Petrina Hicks's polaroids have less obvious artifice. Her subjects face the camera's gaze against a bright pink backdrop, their stance and expression an ambiguous combination of assurance and exposure. *Jason #2*, 2006, is a particularly haunting image. Ponch Hawkes's photographs of acrobats, as previously mentioned, are remarkable studies in movement.

Ray Cook expresses his darkly humorous take on life as a homosexual photographic artist by creating scenarios that draw heavily on historical theatre and circus props. Many of his best-known works ventilate his fury against HIV and AIDS. In this exhibition, *Pixie*, 2007, a gay clown in singlet and braces is pictured swallowing a sword to the hilt against frowsy curtains appliquéd with red stars.



Petrina Hicks, *Freyja Edney #1*, 2006, Polaroid photograph, Polacolor Pro 100 (P6v6), AlburyCity Collection

Petrina Hicks, *Sarah Pitcher #1*, 2006, Polaroid photograph, Polacolor Pro 100 (P6v6), AlburyCity Collection

Petrina Hicks, *Jason Kotzur #1*, 2006, Polaroid photograph, Polacolor Pro 100 (P6v6), AlburyCity Collection



Warren Langley, *Angel #2*, 2007, giclee photographic print. Photograph: David Hancock

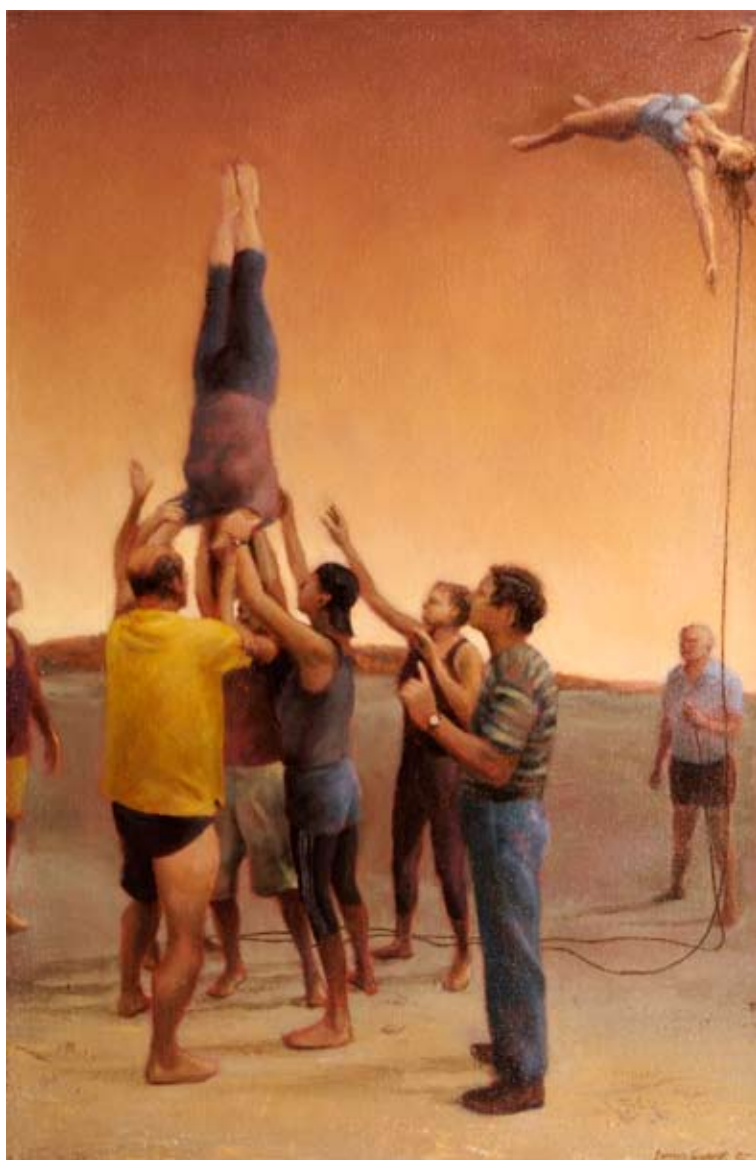


Nerissa Lea, *Muscles of the sky - Nine acts of ingenuity* (detail), pastel on paper, AlburyCity Collection

Works from the residency

Celebrity Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who collaborated with architects Herzog & de Meuron on Beijing's 'Birds Nest' Olympic Stadium, recently spoke of his work in relation to the circus. In a discussion with curator Karen Smith about his monumental installations, some constructed from the remains of ancient Chinese temples and domestic furniture, he remarked: 'The question of installing and removing a work interests me. It's a challenge, but I think of it like a circus that comes to town, sets up, puts on the show, and then packs up to move on.'⁵

In their residency at Albury, invited artists were able to spend considerable time with the Flying Fruit Fly Circus in their permanent home. Nerissa Lea's nine-panel work combines acute observation of circus activities with an obvious delight in pattern, movement and stylised form. Hung in two rows according to her directions, the paintings show the youthful performers practising in and around Albury. The resulting compositions, particularly the top central panel showing the full troupe, recall Charles Meere's *Australian Beach Pattern*. Two unsettling figures – an ill-defined crying child and a boy with a large, naturalistic bird's head – add to the work's surreal ambience.



James Guppy, *Rising to the Bait*, 2007, oil on canvas, Courtesy of the Artist and Brenda May Gallery

The paintings by James Guppy, *Joy Riding with the Last Steering Committee* and *Reaching* are less stylised than Lea's but share a sense of otherworldliness. Some figures appear to be older trainers or family members, their movements and co-operative actions framed within an autumnal beach landscape. The ominous crashing waves in the former work threaten to engulf the foursome who remain completely absorbed in what they are doing, while Joy – sitting balanced on her partner's feet with her back to the viewer – faces the sea.

Picasso's famous *Saltimbanque* series is the inspiration for Graeme Drendel's painting of the same name. It includes twelve figures – some being Albury's circus performers and others to be found elsewhere in the artist's paintings. The composition is dreamlike and suggests a symbolic reading. For instance, one figure holds the statuette of a horse while the dog in the picture is obviously not a captive circus animal. The mood is contemplative, the colours hushed. Details from this work, together with paintings and sketches reflecting Drendel's experience of circus life during the residency, are presented as a vibrant grid of canvas boards.



Stewart MacFarlane *Circus Girl*, 2007, oil on canvas, Courtesy of the Artist and Michael Reid, Elizabeth Bay

In total contrast, Stewart MacFarlane's painting of a young performer is a celebratory 'Song of Innocence'. The colours are as bright as summer flowers after rain and the central placement of the figure high on a mountain above the suburbs (perhaps in Hobart, where the artist lives) suggests that she is on the brink of a brilliant career. Only in the mind of the viewer could darker intimations mar such an optimistic vision.

Tom Alberts completed a series of spontaneous drawings in Albury depicting the movements of performers as they warm up and work together in their practice sessions. The animated lines bring an immediacy and energy to the page that is not always possible in a finished painting. This is true of all the artists' drawings and sketchbooks in the exhibition.

Three very different sculptors working in diverse media were among the artists in residence at Albury. Alexander Seton's seductive marble sculptures evoke the circus through the gym equipment – sandbags, silken ropes and acromats – used in training and performance. The compelling realism and informality of Seton's tensioned works belie the hardness of stone to embody the imprint of human activity.

Stepping away from his various roles as a video and performance artist, Arthur Wicks drew on his mechanical expertise (in consultation with others) to construct a motorised figure that performs dramatic tricks atop a ladder – all at the flick of a switch. Wicks's ingenuity and problem solving genius imbue this piece with a nostalgic sense of fun and awe.

Warren Langley creates major commissioned works that extend the sculptural possibilities of glass and light. At Albury he spent time with the circus performers to develop vivid aerial sequences using light-transmitting optic fibre. Documented by photographer David Hancock, the performers appear like angels embraced by wings of radiant light.

Conclusion

The opportunity for Albury Art Gallery's 2007 residency artists to spend time with the Flying Fruit Fly Circus allowed them freedom to explore the potent ethos and energy of the circus within the context of their wider art practice. The work they produced fits seamlessly into a minor but important tradition of circus themes in Australian art. The changing face of the circus has not diminished the ability of contemporary artists to see beyond surface appearances and reveal enduring themes of human existence.

Laura Murray Cree

28 March 2008

Laura Murray Cree is a writer and former editor of Art & Australia. She is currently Publications Manager, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, and is based in Braidwood NSW.

- 1 Professor Hal Foster, quoted by Sadanand Menon in 'Art as spectacle', The Hindu (online edition), 30 December 2007, see <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/mag/2007/12/30/stories/2007123050010100.htm>
- 2 Philip Astley established the first circus, as we know it, in London in 1770.
- 3 See James Mollison & Nicholas Bonham, Albert Tucker, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1982, p. 47.
- 4 The Science Show, ABC Radio National, 10 January 2004, see transcript <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/ss/stories/s1308517.htm>
- 5 Ai Weiwei, Profile magazine, Autumn 2008, p. 56.



Alexander Seaton, *Sandbags I*, 2007, white marble, gym ropes & pulleys
 Alexander Seaton, *Sandbags II*, 2007, black marble, gym ropes & pulleys



Graeme Drendel *Saltimbanque*, 2007, oil on canvas,
 Courtesy of the Artist and Australian Galleries - Sydney and Melbourne



The Flying Fruit Fly Circus Posters

**ROLL UP,
ROLL UP:
THE FLYING
FRUIT FLY CIRCUS,
A FORCE FOR CHANGE.**

Circus, like any other artform maintains its cultural and social relevance to successive generations by responding to contemporary influences. It is a measure of the strength of Australian circus that it has continued to evolve and to attract audiences since the first circus artists performed in Australia in the 1840s. Since the 1970s, circus has been repositioned as a significant form of contemporary live performance - not only in the arts but also in education. The Flying Fruit Fly Circus has been a noteworthy part of this change.

The Fruit Fly Circus is a place for change; a site of transformation. Nowhere more so than in the life of each student who comes to the circus as a child and leaves as a young adult, having been through a unique experience in education and the performing arts. Change, transformation and passion are threads that run right through the history of the Fruit Fly Circus, for this company is also one of the organisations in Australia that changed the way that we think about contemporary circus.

The Fruit Fly Circus started in 1979 in Albury, as a school holiday program run by the local theatre group, the Murray River Performing Group (MRPG). By choosing circus as a theme, this program tapped into the new circus movement which was part of the renewal of theatre taking place all over the Western world. The early Fruit Fly Circus rode this wave of change.

At the time, Albury-Wodonga was new; part of the Federal government initiative to build regional centres. Large tracts of land around the existing towns of Albury and Wodonga were released for urban development in the early 1970s, and young families flocked to the region to start new lives.

The MRPG that started the Fruit Fly Circus was new - set up by graduating students from the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), which was also new. The VCA was established in 1976 to teach young performers to create new theatre companies to tell the stories of local communities and generate new audiences for a new kind of theatre. A theatre that included a desire to make performance that was raw, physical, popular and immediate. Young performers wanted to tell their own stories directly to their audiences, make their own music, and

explore the changes to social and cultural values that had come out of the recent movements for change: the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, the conservation movement and of course the widespread action against the Vietnam War. Some chose circus as a way to do this. In 1978, the New Circus Ensemble (the company that grew from New Circus, the first alternative circus in Australia), amalgamated with Soapbox Circus to form Circus Australia Limited (Circus Oz), just in time to influence the MRPG.

All this energy came together on the banks of the Murray River for the first Fruit Fly Circus show. Approximately eighty young people worked with professional performers and traditional circus artists over three months as part of the 1979 International Year of the Child. The performance took place in the tent built by Circus Oz; a crazy show, full of slapstick and humour, made possible by the huge support of the Albury community and the mums and dads of the kids involved. It had to continue. Robert (Bomber) Perrier from the MRPG ran it, and Pixi and Jim Robertson who had been traditional circus performers, founding members of Circus Oz, and teachers at the first Fruit Fly Circus project stayed on. The Robertsons invited Micky Ashton of Ashtons Circus to join them and Micky stayed until the end of his long life. This team was the first of many strong circus teaching teams at the Circus.



Anne Zahalka, *The Troupe*, 2007, Type C print, AlburyCity Collection

Anne Zahalka, *The Contortionist*, 2007, Type C print, AlburyCity Collection

Since those early days the Flying Fruit Fly Circus has been a surprisingly potent force in contemporary circus in Australia. One of the ways that the Flying Fruit Fly Circus contributed to the development of Australian circus is through the introduction of new teaching techniques; redefining what is possible to achieve physically, profoundly influencing the circus companies that have taken part. In 1983 the Fruit Fly Circus hosted six acrobats from the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe of China. This ground-breaking project, known as Nanjing 1, took place over three months. It was the initiative of Carrillo Gantner, then Cultural Attaché to the Australian Embassy in China. Fruit Fly Circus students learnt alongside professional artists including Circus Oz. The group Legs On the Wall was formed out of this project. Chinese teachers introduced a philosophy and methodology of training that was new to Australia. Lu Guong Rong, was a performer at the height of his powers when he came to Australia for the project. He stayed in Australia and has been one of the most influential teachers of Australian circus. It is not an overstatement to say that this exchange influenced the language of circus that was understood by practitioners of alternative circus in Australia and that this influence can still be seen in the artistic work in circuses in Australia today. The Fruit Fly Circus has kept an ongoing relationship with Chinese circus training; the most recent exchange being a collaboration with the Shanghai Circus School that culminated in the show 'Fusion', part of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Arts Festival.



In 1993 a three-month national training project, Moscow 1, with Russian circus artists was held. Eight teachers from Russia came to work with the Fruit Fly Circus and professional circus artists, made possible with the help of Edgley International. This exchange influenced the next generation of alternative circus companies in Australia. Circus companies at Moscow 1 included Ashtons Circus, Circus Oz, Club Swing, and Vertigo. Russian teacher, Volodya Evdokimov remained in Australia at the end of this project and was a major influence on the group, acrobat. In turn, acrobat’s influence can be seen in fresh young companies such as The Tom Tom Club.



Anne Zahalka, *Lachlan McAulay and Jason Kotzur, Adagio, base and flyer #1*, 2006, Polaroid photograph Polapan Pro 100
Cross Process (chocolate), AlburyCity Collection

Anne Zahalka, *Brigitte Bailey Tight-wire performer #1*, 2006, Polaroid photograph Polapan Pro 100
Cross Process (chocolate), AlburyCity Collection

In 1987 the Fruit Fly Circus made a transition from an ad hoc community project to a professional training institution, moving from an after-school program to a full-time school funded by the Education Department of Victoria. The Acrobatic Arts Community School (now known as the Flying Fruit Fly School) provided schooling for Fruit Fly Circus students from Year 3 to Year 10. For thirteen years, from the school’s inception until 2000 when the National Institute of Circus Arts opened in Melbourne, it was the sole full-time circus training school in Australia.

The Fruit Fly Circus also took themselves to the world. The first overseas tour was to the Vancouver Children’s Festival in Canada in 1982 and since then the company has toured overseas regularly. The performance program increased significantly when Kim Walker became artistic director in 1998. In 1999 the company performed for a sold-out five week season at the New Victory Theatre, New York. In 2005 the company represented Victoria at the World Expo in Japan. In 2006 it was commissioned by the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival to create a show in collaboration with young performers from Zip Zap Circus, Cape Town, South Africa and the indigenous Brewarrina Youth Circus, Brewarrina, NSW.

The Fruit Fly has contributed many graduates to the circus sector in Australia. The length of the list is indicative of the significance of the company to the circus arts. In Australia this list includes; Circus Oz, Legs On the Wall, Rock ‘N’ Roll Circus (now CIRCA), the Women’s Circus, Ashtons Circus, Circus Royale, Stalker, desoxy, Strange Fruit, Company Skylark, Chamber Made Opera, the Melbourne Theatre Company and Hothouse Theatre. Overseas it includes; Cirque du Soleil of Canada, le Cirque Grande Celeste of France and the London Millenium Dome Project. In addition, Fruit Fly Circus graduates have founded the companies; acrobat, Luna Circus, Price and McCoy, the Leaping Loonies and Cifunkus.

This exhibition echoes the attributes that have made the Fruit Fly Circus what it is today, brave projects with artists in regional Australia, an engaging and challenging mix of emerging and professional artists, an openness to change and a passion for life and for circus.

Dr Jane Mullett was the first full-time head of training at the FFFC (1987-1994).



Thank you to all who have assisted in the development of this exhibition, through their knowledge, advice and loans.

PARTNERS:

Flying Fruit Fly Circus
Visions of Australia
Arts NSW

LENDERS:

Art Gallery of New South Wales
Art Gallery of South Australia
Australian National University
The Arts Centre, Melbourne
Australian Galleries, Melbourne
Ballarat Fine Art Gallery
Burke Museum, Beechworth
Deakin University
New England Regional Art Museum
National Gallery of Australia
National Gallery of Victoria
Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney
Private collection of Margaret Cilento
Tom Alberts
Alexander Seaton
James Guppy
Warren Langley
Stewart McFarlane
Arthur Wicks

EXHIBITION TEAM ALBURYCITY:

Carina Clement	Cultural Programs Team Leader
Jules Boag	Exhibitions & Programs Coordinator
Brenda Wellman	Cultural Projects Officer
Paul Miller	Exhibitions Officer
Erika Balla-Harper	Learning & Outreach Coordinator
Caryn Giblin	Learning & Outreach Officer
Kevin Wilson	former Group Leader Cultural Services
Rita Lazauskas	former Gallery Exhibitions & Collections Curator

arts|nsw 



Australian Government
Visions of Australia

Education resources available
An AlburyCity travelling exhibition
www.alburycity.nsw.gov.au



